

SHORT STORY

Ashiki --- the tale of a family

BIDIT CHOWDHURY

Tuesday morning. Mohabbat Ali is relaxing in his easy chair. Ashik goes up to his father and says, 'Abba, I have made up my mind to get married.'

"What!" screams his father in anger. "This is nonsense; you have no idea what you are saying. How could you think any girl will be ready to marry you?"

"No Abba, you need not be worried, Jenana is ready for marriage."

"Jenana? What Jenana?"

"Jenana is a Persian word. It means woman, lady."

"I have told you many times not to mention any uncommon words in front of me. I have an allergy to such words."

"Okay, Abba. Jennifer is ready to be my bride," Ashik says unemotionally, which leaves Mohabbat Ali quite astonished because he was very anxious during his own marriage. But he decides not to pursue this further.

"Does your mother know about it?"

"No, she is busy at work. So I told you first."

"Okay, call her."

Ashik goes to his mother to bring her. On seeing her, Mohabbat Ali greets her passionately, "Hello, my darling. How are you?"

Sobura Khatun is a middle aged woman, mother of two sons and three daughters. She has no time for affections or affectations.

"I have told you many times not to use obscene language before my children. They become spoilt because of you."

"Okay, my dear, do not mind your old partner. Remember I am your only hope at this age. By the way, do you know about the latest decision of your meritorious son?"

"No, what happened?"

"Tell your mother in detail, my dear son."

Ashik looks a bit gloomy and uncomfortable but says, "Amma, I have decided to get married next Tuesday. I know that you do not mind."

Sobura Khatun cannot believe her ears. "Ashik, would you please repeat what you said?"

"Sure, I will get married next Tuesday and for this I need your blessings and some money."

"What is the name of the bride?"

"Jennifer."

"What? You are going to marry a Christian girl?"

"Oh no, Mother, she is a modern Muslim girl. You can call her Jenny."

Speechless, Sobura now stares at Mohabbat Ali. "You have spoiled my child." She cries.

"What!" Mohabbat Ali exclaims, astonished and frightened at the same time.

"How can I be responsible for the misdeeds of your child?"

"Your mother named him Ashik. I told you then not to give him such a name, which seems dreamy,

But you did not pay any attention to me. Can you explain to me one thing? Why are your family names are so romantic?"

"Oh, thank you darling," Mohabbat Ali blushes. "I do not praise you. Why are you so callous? You are not even aware about your type."

"Okay, I am insensitive. But are you conscious? You always interrogate me, never question your children. Every time you disturb me. Why this? Why that? It seems in my life you are a big 'why this kolaveri di'." Mohabbat Ali is fierce in his reaction.

"What! You, you, you... old guy! I wish I could kill you. I won't spare you!"

When Sobura khatun becomes angry, she hurls such epithets at Mohabbat Ali.

"Oh, Amma will you please stop your everlasting quarrel?" Ashik tries to bring the quarrel to an end.

"Yes, of course. So, my dear son, I beg your pardon. I am proud of you." Sobura is in her state of fury.

"Don't embarrass me, Amma. I know you are proud of me!"

"How stupid you are! Like father, like son. Just a pure dumb headed. I am rebuking you, idiot, over your foolish decision. How can you take such a peculiar step without discussing it with us? Sobura growls.

"I felt no need to discuss it with you. Her father is a very rich man. He has told me that he will give me two of his four garment factories as dowry if I marry his divorcee girl."

"She is a divorcee?" Mohabbat Ali is in a state of absolute shock.

"Actually, two years ago she got married to a wealthy young merchant, who lives in the USA. After a few months they came to know that that young man was an AIDS patient. In the meantime Jenny became pregnant. So things became very critical. Last month she divorced him. Now her father wants to arrange his daughter's second marriage as quickly as possible."

Ashik narrates everything very calmly, which seems like a horror film scene to his parents. It seems he is a man from a different planet.

"For this reason, her father wants to give such a lucrative dowry."

Sobura khatun doesn't understand what to say now. She mumbles, "Your father-in-law is a businessman."

"No, he is a drug smuggler. He is the owner of the biggest brothel in Dhaka."

Mohabbat Ali sinks into the easy chair. He cannot even think. He stops talking and asking anything.

He orders Sobura not to ask any more questions.

"He is totally out of control, Sobura."

His voice sounds grim, like the cloud. But

Sobura does not give up.

"Why you are doing this, Ashik?"

"For you."

"For us?"

"Yes, for you and Abba. What have you done for us? Boro Bhैया committed suicide because he could not manage the money for his admission to Dhaka University. Boro Apa was divorced for dowry. Nitu and Ritu are still unmarried. They could not complete their studies. Why Abba? Can you tell me? Only for your so-called honesty and the kindness of relatives. You know why I could not pass my SSC in the first two terms? Because I had no money for filling up the form. The money I earned by tuition, I had to give it for Dadijan's chemotherapy. Why? Where were my uncles then? No one came then. They cheated us all the time, and you always praise them. Now we have no house of our own. But you were a government employee. Those who were of your rank have five storied buildings in Dhaka. I cannot show my face among my friends. They are now in high positions in different government and multinational companies. But I am still unemployed. But you know me from my childhood. I was no less a good student than any others. Boro Apa often weeps. I am often afraid of her doing something bad! All these things happened only because of you, Abba."

"How dare you talk to your father like this?" Sobura Khatun is indignant.

"I didn't come here to talk. I just wanted to tell you about the marriage. I needed some money for another reason. But let it be. By the way, you are not invited to this marriage. I won't have anything to do with losers any more. You have made my life hell. And I have no regrets about my decision."

Ashik stalks out of the house like a gale. It is late afternoon, with the sun setting in the west. Everything turns calm and quiet. 'All Quiet on the Western Front'. That is how it seems to Mohabbat Ali.

Suddenly he feels very lonely, as if he has no one in the world --- no friends, relatives, no children and no wife. Everything seems so unfamiliar to him.

He feels an urge to go to the veranda. But the very next moment he loses his enthusiasm. The sky is turning gloomy. He sighs.

Mohabbat Ali feels a touch on his shoulder. It is his elder daughter. She comes close and sits beside him.

He gives her a very melancholy look.

"Sorry, Abbu." She says it very softly, but passionately. Tears roll down Mohabbat Ali's cheeks.

BIDIT CHOWDHURY WRITES FICTION.

POETRY

Pencil, sharpener and eraser

RAHAD ABIR

When I was a child, one day my dad came to me,

'I've got something for you, my boy,' He says,

'You'll need them throughout your life.'

Quite inquisitive, I looked at them

A pencil, a sharpener and an eraser.

I got the ball rolling right away, drawing on the wall.

'He'll be an artist, you see,' Dad declares to Mom.

Gradually, I began to understand the differences between leads.

I preferred 3B pencil. 'Don't use it much; you'll make a mess.'

He tells me, 'You can use it when you are big.'

Still I used that. And struggled to erase my mistakes. I tried harder, and, out of the blue, the page went torn.

I am a big boy now man.

I've written lots and lots of

pages.

There're many words in the pages I left behind

life, love, success, failure, food, break-up, boredom, death, sex, marriage, divorce, deceit, day, night, internet, job, money, memory, traffic, transport, frustrationhell of a lot, I'm sick and tired

of writing those again and again.

But I still write. Writing with a pencil with one hand and holding the sharpener and eraser with the other.

'For a good start you need to sharpen your pencil well beforehand.' Daddy used to say, I remember.

I do and I only use 3B for the final touch. I don't want to make

a mess. Now I understand, eraser always can't erase everything,

Can it?

RAHAD ABIR IS A WRITER AND TRANSLATOR.

A roar of magic

REHNUMA SIDDIQUE

Evening clasps God's aura
Sets upon the limpid soil,
Enchantment scintillates in our lustful eyes
Waiting for the haughty ascent.

Vultures had surrounded the vast azure
Crows engulfed the infinity
May our wishes be fulfilled,
May they mean the expected!

Blood-hungry as we were,
We set out on a rampage.
We are calamity,
We are the heroes,
We, the saviours.

Awed by Babel, the magnanimity surrendered
Our voices had topped.
With its omnipotent resonance, the dolphins had seized
The crystalline pieces of magic contaminated
With lies, possessions.

With one last hope, we lay under the mountain
Watched the sunset with magic.

We stuttered in comfort
As the warmth loomed gracefully over the nudity
Making us blush.

But now, the soil had clenched our hearts
Extolling them with a hidden desperation.

We moaned under the moonlit sky,
We moaned passion, love and beauty.

When most inexplicably the indignant mountain encumbered upon our shoulders,
We blanched into a rosy evening pink.
Our hearts embroiled in a cloying melody.
We moaned again,
A beautiful tune.

REHNUMA SIDDIQUE WRITES FICTION AND POETRY

REMEMBRANCE

The humility of Shawkat Osman

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There have been illustrious men I chanced to meet at twilight. You could say it was the twilight in their lives, or in mine. And yet those meetings and all that acquaintance were to inject rich substance into the way I have thought of the world, of the poetry it contains, of the mysticism it thrives on. My friendship with Shawkat Osman was all too brief, a mere four years. It was this great and yet unassuming man of letters who took it upon himself sometime in late 1994 to call me early in the morning, to let me know how much he relished reading my articles. On the banks of the Irrawady. That was the write-up he mentioned, a piece which had appeared in the *Morning Sun*, the newspaper I was then working for. He told me he had been keen to get in touch with me for a long time and it was not until Syed Najmuddin Hashim gave him my phone number that he was able to locate me.

That was the beginning. The humble and yet warm way he addressed me as 'bhrato' every time he called me is what I hear even today, all these years after his passing. He would call early in the morning, proof that he was an early riser. And then would come an invitation to see him at his home in Rajarbagh. Many were the evenings I sat and listened to him discourse on poetry, indeed on the arts. And then, of course, there was the inevitable veering off into a discussion of politics. He had absolutely no room for liberalism when it came to talking about those who had opposed the War of Liberation. In his poetry, there was in the final years of his life a definitive preoccupation with politics. Those who had assisted the Pakistan occupation army in 1971 must not be tolerated, indeed must be made to face justice. It was a principle with which you could not but agree.

Shawkat Osman's life was embedded in absolute humility. You would not for a moment imagine, as you spoke to him or heard him speak of life, that you were in the august company of the man who had given the world such works of intensity as *Janani* and *Kritodasher Hashi*. Ideas spun off his mind with a speed one does not usually come by in writers. And Osman gave those ideas to you straight. For him, it did not matter whether you agreed with him or chose to take a different approach to the issue he had raised. He simply knew he had to put his views across to you. And he did. He was happy when Sheikh Hasina took over as prime minister in June 1996. And for Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmed he had an abundance of respect that only those who have remembered the modern history of Bengal will know. He made it a point to tell me, more than once, of how much he appreciated my dedication to the ideals of the War of Liberation, an assertion which only made me feel even more humble than I was in his



company.

Every time I visited Shawkat Osman, he insisted that I have tea with him. Tea is one aspect of life I have never been able to do without, but to have tea offered by this great man was a trifle disturbing --- because he would make it himself. He had an elderly manservant around, toward whom he was profoundly respectful and extremely solicitous. I recall a time when the manservant was somewhat ill but insisted that he prepare tea for the writer and me. Shawkat Osman would have none of it and in his ever gentle way told the man to go rest. It is behaviour you hardly come by in people around you. There are all the humbugs around; and humbugs were people Osman was endlessly exposing through his writings and in his everyday conversation. A remarkable quality in writers like Shawkat Osman is that they do not flinch from taking the lid off lies and hypocrisy. In works like *Rajshakhi*, Osman cheerfully launched himself into the business of unmasking men whose words did not suit their actions.

Shawkat Osman, in the few years that I was fortunate enough to know him, always made it a point to give me copies of his published works. No, he did not give them to me all at once but one at a time. There was always a poem, a *chorha* or rhyme, he composed for me on the initial, blank pages of a work before passing the book to me. I have kept all the copies of all the works Shawkat Osman gave me in a safe, special niche of the little personal library I have tried creating in my room at home.

It was on a spring day in May 1998, in London, that news came to me of the death of Shawkat Osman. I stood at the window in my office, looking out at the leaves on the trees swaying in the breeze and at the people walking by the imposing structure of Imperial College, and missed my friend the writer. A year and a half earlier he had roused me from sleep, to let me know for the very first time that I was going to London as media spokesperson at the Bangladesh High Commission. Sensing that I was somewhat being unable to take him at his word, he read out from the newspaper which carried the story of my appointment. I sat up in bed, a feeling of delight coursing through me.

At that window, on that spring day, I remembered that earlier day in January 1997. The breeze kept playing among and around and through the trees.

(The 96th birth anniversary of Shawkat Osman (1917-98) --- novelist, poet, teacher, columnist --- was observed on 2 January).

SYED BADRUL AHSAN EDITS STAR LITERATURE AND STAR BOOKS REVIEW.

POINT OF VIEW

Humayun Ahmed and a movie

MASUD AHMED

We are a people whose penchant for hyperboles and superlatives is indeed ancient and incorrigible. The daily expressions almost on anything and issues of our life probably vouch for that with rather a few exceptions. These are:

- We are firmly determined to do this
- We are oath bound to perform that
- This culvert will be built at any cost
- If necessary I will lay down my life for this
- The punishment to top-terror 'Akabbor' will be exemplary
- Nobody will be spared by any means
- Highest quality at lowest prices

The above diction and vocabulary can be expanded to include any facet of life and be vouched for with the innumerable roaring of thunder made by responsible people every day. Likewise, we do evaluate persons in the same vein. Someone is either the 'best of men' or 'unbecoming of being called a human being'. Objectivity, tranquility or balance are usually missing in most of the evaluations and assessments, be it about a personality in music, politics, literature or social service. We have seen this even in the case of our only Nobel laureate. One quarter has given him the highest commendations, lifting him into the seventh sky, while many have derogatively slung him into the cesspit. Our congratulations are always 'heartfelt' and full throated and our condemnation of somebody is likewise 'deep', severe and piercing.

The fluttering of the whirlwind and splashing of water around Humayun Ahmed are still very vibrant. Undoubtedly, this most popular writer of our generation has received accolades from millions of his readers. However, not enough of a time span has yet elapsed that will determine his quality and genius at an appropriate hour in the future. His "Nondito Noroke", "Shonkhonil Karagar", "Tomader Jonno Valobasha", "Jononi o Josnar Golpo", "Shamol Chhaya", "Aoyomoy", "Kothao Keu Nei" and a host of other literary

creations have been masterpieces in the vernacular. These are all about Bangladesh, Bengal and Bangla, along with the history, the traditions and religion. Now what I am about to tell you will be go against the bandwagon. How did this observer and feeler, if one may use such a term, of this society compose, direct, film and screen "*Ghetooputra Kamala*"? If it was only carnal aberrations it would be one thing. The story speaks of a perversion, highly exceptional and yet negative in all senses. It is not Europe where people will appreciate it culturally. Nor is it a scientifically advanced society where people will see the 'doctrine of necessity' of the human (animal) body and mind.

No, this has been an immoral act. What a contradiction of the thoughts propounded by the half-baked clerics of our society! Besides the main theme of sodomy, the teasing and taunts, et cetera, shown very cleverly by Humayun is unmistakable. This writer has earlier shown incestuous relationships between grandfather and grandchildren. Tagore once said, "Superlatives are never appreciated by Nature". Very high things must come down and settle at their normal levels. Neither strongly nor listlessly, I would like to register my displeasure at this film by this maestro. Instead of effecting a catharsis, the very sights and sounds of the movie have tarnished the otherwise impeccable quality of performance by Tarik Anam along with the aesthetics of the writer-cum-producer-cum-director of this film. This film demonstrates no glow of light. This is not our cup of tea.

The evaluations of the writer, especially after his demise, were in many cases wide of the mark. These will surely come down to settle at their entitled levels. However, I am neither qualified nor prepared to make a critical appreciation of all creations of this giant in our literary landscape. My comment refers only to this film, screened recently.



MASUD AHMED IS A NOVELIST, SHORT STORY WRITER AND CRITIC